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ABSTRACT

To test the thesis that most magazines for preschool children are not appropriate for the intended audience, an analysis was made of seven magazines published for children between 2 and 6 years of age. Periodicals selected for review were "Happy Times," "Highlights for Children," "Humpty Dumpty's Magazine," "National Geographic World," "Sesame Street Magazine," "Turtle Magazine for Preschool Kids," and "Your Big Backyard." One issue of each magazine was rated according to seven criteria related to characteristics of preschool children and publications, including cognitive development, humor, reading readiness, illustrations, content, design features, and percent of pages focusing on workbook type skills. It is concluded that, of the seven periodicals reviewed, only "National Geographic World" solely and completely provided young children with entertainment and interesting information which offered many opportunities for extended discussion. (RH)

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AN EVALUATION OF MAGAZINES FOR THE VERY YOUNG

by

Merry Ellen Scofield

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PART I - THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

Statement of the Problem

A number of American publishers produce magazines intended for use and enjoyment by children under six years of age. It is the purpose of this research paper to analyze whether or not these periodicals do, in fact, address themselves to the needs of the very young.

Preschoolers work within their own cognitive level. Do editors display an awareness for the abilities, attention span, and the general interest level of these children?

A magazine becomes a workbook if it sacrifices entertainment for the sake of skill building or teaching. In an age when parents are increasingly concerned with early academic achievement, are magazines for the young turning into parental textbooks? Is their aim to please the child or the adult?

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this paper, 'magazine' will refer to any periodical geared for children approximately two to six years old which can either be purchased at a newsstand or ordered through a subscription by the general public. No magazines meant for use

by teachers in the classroom, such as Weekly Reader's Funday or Scholastic's Let's Find Out, have been considered, nor have any children's magazines published by religious institutions.

Hypothesis

The researcher hypothesizes that the majority of magazines for preschoolers on the general market today show a limited regard for the concerns of their intended audience.

An attempt will be made to prove the hypothesis by first reviewing current data on:

- 1) the cognitive development and stages of preschool children,
- 2) the attention span of these children as it regards to written material, entertainment, and visual stimuli,
- 3) professional analysis of the general interests of preschoolers,
- 4) the level of humor in children under six,
- 5) assessing reading readiness and providing appropriate experiences.

The collected data will then be used in an examination of specific samples of the magazines defined.

PART II - THE REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Professional Literature

Cognitive Development

Using Jean Piaget's stages of intelligence in children (Piaget, 1952), the following can be given as a guide to the intellectual capabilities of children two through six years.

- 1) Children between two and four years adopt systems of representation such as language, imaginative play, and imitation. The progress in this area tends to be rapid.
- 2) The use of language greatly increases the child's ability to solve problems and learn through verbalization of others.
- 3) Children between two and four years of age think egocentricly.
- 4) Children between two and four years attribute human characteristics to inanimate objects, plants, and animals - termed animism.
- 5) Egocentricity and animism fade as children develop.
- 6) Children between four and seven years of age solve problems in relationships (classifying, quantifying, etc.), but do so intuitively.
- 7) Children between four and seven years do not initially understand that every logical operation is reversible.

Piaget places preschool children in the preoperational stage of development. As noted above, although some children advance faster than others, they all go through the same steps. Characteristics of the preoperational child which effect his ability to gain meaning from print are:

- 1) Preoperational children have difficulty understanding one-to-one correspondence. Because of this, they may have trouble matching written words to their spoken counterpart.
- 2) Preoperational children do not understand class inclusion; the relationship between part and whole. This may cause difficulty in appreciating phonics and the use of upper and lower case letters.
- 3) Preoperational children do not understand seriations, and, thus, are unable to think sequentially, and both backward and forward at the same time.

Arnold Gesell gives further insight into cognitive development in Infant and Child in the Culture Today (revised 1974). He states the following generalities.

- Second year: The child attains a rudimentary sense of personal identity and personal possession.
- Third year: The child speaks in sentences, uses words as tools of thought, shows an inclination towards understanding his environment and complying with cultural demands.
- Fourth year: The child asks innumerable questions, perceives analogies, and displays a tendency to

Fourth year: The child asks innumerable questions, perceives analogies, and displays a tendency to conceptualize and generalize. He is nearly self-dependent in home-life skills.

Fifth year: The child can narrate a long tale, speak articulately, and show socialized pride in his achievements. He is a self-assured, conforming citizen in his small world.

Attention Span

Young children are distracted easily. They sustain their attention for only short periods of time, but the amount of time varies from child to child (Hetherington and Parke, 1979).

In a study of young children between two and four years watching a segment of "Sesame Street" (Anderson and Levin, 1976) the differences in attention span were wide, but generally related to age.

Since most preschoolers can not read, they obtain little or no meaning from written material. If the reader's goal is simply an oral listening experience, she need only supply herself with material the child will find interesting, but if attention to the page is expected then there must be heavy pictorial content.

Robert Bruinsma (1984) retells of a 'lap technique' which exemplifies the short attention span of young children and the use of picture material. The child, beginning at about six months, is placed on the adult's lap, book in hand. The illustrations are viewed, discussed, and scanned. Eventually,

the text is read. This technique continues through age five and is meant as an emotional conditioning to books. It also allows for the varied attention span of children. Note that the use of picture books is assumed.

One authoritative list of books for the very young (Ames, 1980) exclusively names picture books with short or moderate amounts of text. The books mentioned contain pictures which illustrate appropriate actions in the plot, not items, and can tell a story within themselves.

A study on stimuli preference (Suchman and Trabasso, 1966) determined that Western children shift from a preference towards color-based stimuli to stimuli based on form or shape. This shift occurs about the time children in our culture learn to read. When the study was done in a culture that emphasizes oral memorization over reading in teaching its very young, no preference was determined (Suchman, 1966). This points up the theory that attention is not a stable in young children, but is interrelated to personal interest.

General Interest Range

What best catches the attention of the preschooler? A partial list can be compiled from insights gained in Gesell (revised 1974). They include:

Birthday parties, holidays

Chants and rhymes

Daily routines

Simple repetitive songs

Imaginative play

Television

Telephones	Instruments
Machines at work	Large, clear pictures
Projects (older children)	Fantasy
Silly words	Him or herself

Humor in Young Children

The majority of humor in young children is not cognitive. It is predominantly based on some form of motor activity (Jersild, 1947). Children in the early preoperational stage are limited to stimuli "perceptually discrepant from the child's prior experience. Children find humor in sights and sounds, or descriptions of the same." (McGhee, 1972) Unlike adults, it is unconfirmed that young children deal, to any extent, with superiority, or vindictive humor.

The young child has not achieved sufficient cognitive mastery over his environment to know when fantasy is fantasy or when it is a reality experience with which he is unfamiliar. This confusion removes the opportunity to perceive many happenings as humorous (McGhee). With the onset of concrete thinking, at about seven years, more humor is available to the child. The child can now find humor in situations not dependent on his prior experiences. He can appreciate word play, human foibles, and improbable relationships (Whitt and Prentice, 1977).

Researchers often do not include humor caused by play situations as true humor (Keith-Spiegel, 1972).

Reading Readiness

There are two types of reading readiness. One is readiness to read, the other is readiness to cope with reading instruction. The first takes no more than an interest in gaining meaning from print and, on the part of the adult, the ability to find print of which the child can make sense. The second, particularly in the training of phonics, can require a certain amount of maturation (Smith, 1978).

A selection of experiences that will supply a child with opportunities to expand on his interest in reading are given by Weaver (1980).

- 1) Children need to listen to the written word, through literature read aloud to them. Literature that has predictable patterns is extremely helpful.
- 2) Children need the opportunity to respond to literature.
- 3) Children need experience in handling books.
- 4) Children need to be able to follow along with stories.
- 5) Children need experience dictating their own stories.
- 6) Most importantly, children need to think of themselves as readers.

What purpose does a good magazine serve in reaching these goals? "Magazines written for children are resources for the language-arts' ..They are compact, colorful, and attract the student's attention while providing a different source of reading and for acquiring current information about the world" (Weaver).

Although it has been stressed that the actual text of a magazine for preschoolers should be limited, the importance of print awareness in prereaders (Huba, 1985), and ingrained in the

Weaver suggestions, makes some understandable text more desirable than a simple picture essay.

The Magazines

Happy Times

Happy Times is published ten times a year by Eagle Systems International in Provo, Utah. Listed in Writer's Market (1986) "for children ages three-six with emphasis on educational and moral content", it has a small circulation of 50,000. No board of advisors is listed in the publication.

Highlights for Children

Highlights is published eleven times a year for children two through twelve. The magazine gives no board of consultants. It is "dedicated to helping children grow-in basic skills and knowledge-in creativeness-in ability to think and reason-in sensitivity to others-in high ideals-and worthy ways of living

Humpty Dumpty's Magazine

Humpty Dumpty is published by Children's Health Publications out of Indianapolis, Indiana. It is produced eight times a year "stressing health, nutrition, hygiene, exercise and safety for children four-six". The magazine lists four medical consultants.

National Geographic World

World Magazine is a monthly publication of the National

Geographic Society, out of Washington D.C., and is geared to children eight and older. This researcher includes it in her list of magazines for preschoolers, because she has had personal experience with its positive effect on the very young. The magazine gives no mention of a board of advisors, but gives an extensive list of researchers and credited illustrators, particularly photographers.

Sesame Street Magazine

Sesame Street Magazine is published ten times a year by The Children's Workshop in New York. It advertises itself as "A Creative Magazine Written To Make Learning For 2-6 Year Olds Fun!". The Board of Advisors is comprised of a professor of Human Development at the Institute for Child Study at the University of Maryland, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the director of research at Sesame Street Television, the Chairperson of the Pediatrics Department of Cornell Medical Center, and a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Turtle Magazine for Preschool Kids

Turtle is produced by the Children's Health Publications in Indianapolis, Indiana; the same producers of Humpty Dumpty. Published monthly, it emphasizes "safety, exercise and good nutrition" for preschoolers. It lists three medical consultants on its inside cover.

Your Big Backyard

Your Big Backyard is published each month through the National Wildlife Federation, Washington D.C. Advertised for preschoolers three to five, it claims to "expand a child's awareness of the world, build pre-reading skills, and give hours of fun and surprises". The publication listed two consultants in early childhood education on its inside cover.

Magazine Reviews

This researcher was unable to find current reviews of specific preschool magazines. She did locate three surveys for parents. One in Booklist, one in Parents, and one in Good Housekeeping.

Booklist Magazine's article on magazines for children (Richardson, 1985) describes Turtle, Sesame Street, Highlights, and Your Big Backyard (also World). Distinctions mentioned include: Turtle - Similar to other children's publications of the Children's Better Health Institute in style, subject matter (health), lay-out, and number of pages (48). Publications for the youngest contain less text and fewer areas of interest. Light and lively touch...covers are always multi-colored and busy...only one color to a page.

Sesame Street - Emphasizes animated characters through lively, fully illustrated pages in bold, vivid colors. Each piece is one or two full pages, often involving the the reader with things to cut out or fill in. Reflects, as much as possible, the fast pace of the television screen.

Highlights - Demonstrates much variety in subject matter, reading and interest levels, style of writing and illustrations. This monthly is about the only general interest monthly left since those bought by the Children's Institute became health-centered. Nonfiction generally the better pieces. The quality of the text and picture matter displays diversity - from mundane to distinguished.

Your Big Backyard - Splendid color photos; there are more pieces on the animal kingdom than the plant world, but close-up photos of either are spectacular. Careful attention is given to clarify the illustrations and guides children to sharpen their observation skills. Produced on high quality paper, this visual exposure to the wonders of nature is a real bargain.

World - Learning and fun in factual stories and colorful pictures about the things that kids like most: wild animals, pets, hobbies, sports, and, of course, other kids. About a half dozen lively but not lengthy stories (for children eight and older). Photos of children, animals, and places, all in vivid color and obviously the products of skilled photographers, are found on each page, often filling it and sometimes a double spread. Pullout pages of folded posters and games are

other specials in this splendid and enlightening picture magazine.

Parents Magazine gives brief descriptions of the preschool magazines Sesame Street and Highlights, calling them among "a few of the best" children's publications (Leekley, 1985); and does not list World. Good Housekeeping, mentioning "some of the magazines we've reviewed and liked" mentions only Humpty Dumpty and Highlights for preschoolers, and does not mention World for older children (McDermott, 1985).

PART III - RESEARCH METHODS

Organizing the Data

After gathering the research material and current samples of the magazines under discussion, it becomes necessary to organize the data in some type of format that shows whether or not each magazine meets the criteria indicated through the literature.

It was decided that a chart would be the most efficient way of beginning an analysis (see CHART 1), followed by a critique of each magazine.

Using the research material as a basis for deciding appropriate qualities of each sample, the resulting criteria were chosen.

1. Cognitive development: Does the magazines clearly express an understanding of the cognitive level of a preschool child through the intellectual level of its stories, articles, and activities?
2. Illustrations: Are the illustrations clear, colorful, large; do they describe action rather than objects; do they dominate the articles?
3. Content: Is poetry included; fiction; nonfiction articles

- unrelated to activities; are the topics concrete and simple, and dealt with one at a time; is the material seasonal, fresh, current; do the editors use research-based interest areas; if there are activities, can they actually be completed by the very young; is there a parents' guide?
4. Humor element: Has an attempt been made to include it in the material, is it visual?
 5. Reading readiness: Are there opportunities for listening to the written word, and responding to it; for following along with the material; are there opportunities for predicting; does the magazine build print awareness; do articles and stories ever make use of a repetitive literary style; are the listening stories short (300 words or less); is the language used clear and rhythmic?
 6. Publication: Is the periodical made of sturdy material; does the cover page attempt to attract childrens' interest; is the magazine easy to handle for children and adults holding children; is the magazine readily available?
 7. Percentage of pages dealing with workbook type skills.

Entering Data

At least three current samples of each periodical, except Happy Times, was reviewed. It was determined that all seven publications followed fairly rigid format standards - between one month and the next there was little difference in lay out of material, quality and quantity of illustrations, or subject

matters. If all identification was removed from the magazines, it would still be very clear which, for example, was Humpty Dumpty and which was Highlights. Each magazine has a well established personality of its own.

With this in mind, it seemed unnecessary to chart more than one sample of each magazine. Instead, one current issue was chosen for each periodical.

CHART 1

ANALYSIS OF MAGAZINES FOR PRESCHOOLERS

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT: an understanding of 1--2--3--4--5--6--7-
 in stories.....Y S S S Y Y *
 in articles.....Y S S Y Y Y *
 in activities.....Y N S Y Y Y *

ILLUSTRATIONS: 1--2--3--4--5--6--7-
 clear.....Y Y S N Y Y Y
 color emphasized over shape.....Y Y S S Y S Y
 action illustrations.....S S Y Y Y Y Y
 dominate articles.....Y S S S Y Y Y
 dominate stories.....N N N N S S S

CONTENT: 1--2--3--4--5--6--7-
 simple poetry.....N N Y Y Y Y N
 fiction.....Y Y S Y Y Y N
 non-fiction articles (not activity based)....Y S S Y Y Y Y
 topics: concrete subjects.....Y S S S Y Y Y
 simple, singular subject.....S Y S S Y Y Y
 fresh.....Y Y S N Y Y Y
 seasonal.....S Y S Y S Y S
 current.....N N N N N N Y
 use of research-suggested interest areas....Y S S S Y Y Y
 easy to follow, simple activities.....Y N S S S Y *
 parent guide.....Y S S N Y N N

HUMOR: 1--2--3--4--5--6--7-
 attempt to include in magazine.....S S S Y Y Y Y
 visual.....Y Y S S Y Y Y

READING READINESS: child's opportunity to 1--2--3--4--5--6--7-
 listen to print.....Y Y Y Y Y Y S
 respond to print.....Y Y Y Y Y Y Y
 follow along with articles.....S S Y Y Y Y Y
 build print awareness.....Y Y Y S Y Y S
 sharpen predicting skills.....S S Y Y Y Y Y

READING READINESS: 1--2--3--4--5--6--7-
 do stories make use of repetitive words.....N N N Y N S *
 listening stories short (under 300 words)....Y N Y N Y Y *
 is language clear and rhythmic.....S S S S S S S

PUBLICATION: 1--2--3--4--5--6--7-
 of sturdy material.....Y Y Y N Y N Y
 cover page meant to attract child.....Y Y Y Y Y Y Y
 easy to handle.....Y Y Y S Y S Y
 readily available.....S N S S Y N S

PERCENTAGE OF PAGES DEALING WITH WORK- 1--2--3--4--5--6--7-
 BOOK TYPE SKILLS.....15 33 60 15 50 10 0

* = not applicable 1 = Big Backyard 8/86 4 = Humpty Dumpty 1/86
 Y = yes/present 2 = Happy Times 12/85 5 = Sesame Street 3/86
 N = no/not present 3 = Highlights 2/86 6 = Turtle 8/86
 S = sometimes or somewhat 7 = World 5/86

PART IV - RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Results

Your big Backyard

Preschoolers are attracted to animals, and Big Backyard offers an beautiful expanse of wildlife in full page, close-up, color photos. In the July issue, a variety of print type was used, and the articles accompanying the animal photos were very brief and concrete.

The 'Read to Me' story was a double page, 200 word story about a flying squirrel that asked a lot of the reader's ability to visualize mentally. The photos with the story were uncharacteristicly boring.

The parents pages were very instructive about wildlife and the purpose of the articles; and made no mention of the skill pages included in the publication. As colorful and fun as those skill pages were, they looked exactly like reprints from a Kindergarten math workbook, and this researcher feels they distracted from the overall quality of the magazine.

Happy Times

The illustrations in this magazine are a fresh mix of crisp

photos and colorful drawings. Each issue sets a theme (December's was Hidden Talents). The 800 word 'Bedtime Story' had pleasant illustrations on each of the four pages, but the story took a long time to make its point.

The activities were geared more towards early elementary children - sock puppets and fairly elaborate salt dough art, for example. The theme of one short article on Hanukkah gelt was a bit advanced also. The table of contents gave a parent chart of the skills emphasized in each article.

Highlights

Highlights has changed for the better since this researcher was a child. It is far more colorful than before, with more variety. Like Happy Times, the table of contents gives a parents chart, but this one explains, more or less, which articles are for what age child. Unfortunately, the articles in the February issue labeled for 'Preparation for Reading' were almost all focused on skill-building, and one Hidden Picture activity was totally inappropriate (find Saturn...a swallow...all in a busily drawn black and white picture of a Viking boat at sea). There was a nice rebus story though, and an easily understood cartoon strip.

Humpty Dumpty and Turtle

Although Humpty Dumpty advertises itself for children four to six, this researcher fears that it is somewhat too colorless to attract that age group. The stories, also, were quite long

and abstract.

On the other hand, Turtle was a pleasant surprise. The publishers added lots more color than they do to their other childrens' publications, and it is the only magazine this researcher reviewed which included a page by page picture story. Like the other Children's Institute magazines, Turtle contains a great deal of articles in rhyme, all short and snappy. The few skill pages were the type of thing seen in commercial preschool coloring books: alphabet, dot-to-dot, and counting.

Sesame Street

Sesame Street lives up to its advertising to "make learning...fun", but reads like a classroom aid. The best part of the March issue was the parents guide, more like a magazine in a magazine. It contained articles on family field trips, coping with anger, and briefs on the latest developments in subjects of interest to parents of preschoolers.

World

This publication does not pretend to be geared to preschoolers, so it would be unfair to criticize its writing for being lengthy and detailed. Every page, though, is filled with interesting and curious action photos; the type of photo that encourages questioning and predicting. The subjects were animals and lots of kids. It also contains up-to-date material, a sort of hot-off-the-presses feel that it wasn't apparent in the preschool magazines researched.

Conclusions

On the whole, today's periodicals have axes to grind; they are not designed to entertain boys and girls with interesting information or to help them escape from the terrifying world of too-much-ness. Instead of being a friend to its reader, the typical so-called magazine of today hammers away at ideological goals. (Rose, 1976)

On the whole, the magazines for preschoolers on the market today, have set goals for themselves - and met them. The question might be if they have set the right goals. They all profess to educate. Sesame Street Magazine is fun and crisp and colorful, but it is still a workbook. Your Big Backyard and Turtle seem to have added their skill pages with a "we'd better, or parents won't like it" attitude. Highlights contains a little of everything nowadays, but does not seem to want to devote the space necessary to provide preschoolers with good literary material. Happy Times needs a few good early childhood consultants. Only World, not even intended for preschoolers, provides the very young solely and completely with entertainment and interesting information - fresh and current. It also offers immense opportunities for extended discussion, something that this researcher feels should be a major qualification for any good magazine. The publications for preschoolers reviewed here would do well to follow suit.

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